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Pollphail Industrial Village and Graffiti Art Gallery, Argyll and Bute





Pollphail's origins: the 1970's oil boom

Economic boom times can lead to some extraordinary decisions being taken. The story of Pollphail is one such story. The location was chosen for the site of a fabrication yard that would turn out oil platforms. This meant a large workforce needed housing and there was a sparse population on this part of the Cowal peninsular in Argyll, at the time. To alleviate the lack of accommodation a workers village was designed by Thomas Smith, Gibb and Pate Architects. The village was built between 1975 and 1977. When it was finished, it should have housed up to 500 people in accommodation blocks. In addition, the workers were furnished with a central, multi-functional block that comprised a recreation space, kitchens, a laundrette and a TV lounge. But the workers never arrived. The oil industry never moved to Loch Fyne as it was deemed too expensive to build platforms on the west coast of Scotland. So places like the Nigg fabrication yard on the Cromarty Firth flourished and Pollphail, well it failed!



Agents of Change

Over the past 40 years the terms 'eyesore', 'ruin' and 'ghost village' have all been applied to Pollphail during its abandoned lifespan. But underlying the story of decay and attempted rejuvenation projects, lies a different story: the hidden significance of an abandoned village and the unforeseen outcomes of artistic interventions at abandoned places. Over the past forty years the village has passed through a number of owner's hands and the occasional plan would be presented that would redevelop the village. But as time moved on little happened apart from water ingress, damp encroached and the village took on the usual façade of decay. The occasional visitor and Urbex (urban explorer) would come past on their way to the Portavadie to Tarbert ferry, but little else changed.

However, in 2009, a group of artists known as Agents of Change (@wearetheaoc) were invited by the owner to come to the village. Their aim, as they discuss in their short film (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnKMqN0hJkg>) was to paint the village. Their work transformed the grey-harled exteriors and mouldy interiors. Their creative responses to walls the village presented to them ranged from painted mono-chrome figures to compositions by all six artists. They collaborated on gable-end murals and by the end of their 3 day intervention they had created over 80 pieces of work across the village.

At the same time the village was not given a thorough standing buildings survey by the Heritage body charged with that role. However, it was recognised that the combination of the built fabric and the graffiti art together had changed people's perceptions of the place. In addition, since 2009, Argyll council have put up brown 'tourist' signs indicating the route to Pollphail and calling it 'Argyll's Secret Coast Road' and visitors began to turn up to see the 'ghost village' and its painted walls.

One particular image exemplified the artist's astute use of location and how they went about telling the world about their work at Pollphail. The image shows a human head speaking a string of numbers. The numbers in the speech bubble are the latitude and longitude co-ordinates of the village. This use of digital location demonstrates the artist's knowledge that images can be viewed globally and that location/place is still important to viewers. It also demonstrates that the artists don't need to hang their works in a gallery to show them.

After Agents of Change visited the site other graffiti artists painted further contributions and the sense of a burgeoning gallery at Pollphail prevailed. Visitors came from across the world to visit the 'ghost village' and it became a popular destination for locals and visitors. In 2016, Historic Environment Scotland recorded the village and the graffiti through photography and site survey. At the end of 2016 the village was demolished for a re-development scheme that will see a distillery, brewery and houses being built.

Pollphail illustrates that some ruins will never become designated sites, but that doesn't mean that they aren't important to people and significant to others. In the case of Pollphail it was the intervention by Agents of Change in 2009 that changed the significance of the abandoned ruin. From the story of Pollphail it would appear that graffiti art can have an effect on people, which changes their idea of the significance of a place. Who would have thought that graffiti could have such a positive transformative effect?

Dr Alex Hale, Archaeologist, Survey and Recording





<https://canmore.org.uk/site/299112/pollphail-village>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AnKMqN0hJkg>



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